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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000749

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: AK GOVERNMENT'S ATTEMPT TO BROADEN ACCESS TO KORAN COURSES: A HELP OR A HINDRANCE TO OPEN SOCIETY?

Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) Summary: The GOT in December withdrew new regulations that would have made it easier to open Koran courses after opponents called them a threat to the "secular" State. An official from the Religious Affairs Directorate acknowledged political mistakes in the handling of the regulation, but defended its content as a much-needed response to public demand. He said the regulation will be reintroduced later this year. The controversy reflects both a distrust across the political spectrum of the ruling AK party's motives on religious matters and deep-rooted public dissatisfaction with official limits on Islamic expression. End Summary.

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Diyamet Issues, Withdraws Regulation  
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2. (U) Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyamet), attached to the Prime Ministry and responsible for overseeing Islamic education and all mosques in Turkey, amended regulations in Nov. 2002 to ease access to organized study of the Koran through opening of new Koran courses. Key elements of the amendments included:

-- Night Courses: Night Koran courses could be opened for working adults.

-- Minimum Class Size: A minimum of 10 students would be required to open a Koran course; currently, a minimum of 15 students is required.

-- Teachers: In cases where permanent teachers are not available, Koran courses could be taught temporarily by qualified civil servants from the Ministry of education or graduates of imam hatip (preacher) high schools.

-- Location: In addition to mosques, Koran courses could be taught in empty dormitories or boarding houses.

-- Summer Courses: The current regulations specify that summer Koran courses can operate for two months, meeting up to three days per week; the amended regulations would have removed any such limits.

3. (U) Opponents of the amendments -- including left-of-center/statist main opposition CHP, main elements of the State Establishment, and much of the media -- asserted that implementation would threaten Turkey's "secular" State. Opponents also accused ruling AK party of trying to evade public scrutiny by issuing the amendments on the eve of the end-of-Ramazan week-long Sugar Holiday. In December the Diyanet withdrew the amendments for further work.

4. (U) This tug of war is not a new phenomenon. It comes in the context of a century-long, unresolved and often bitter debate about the place of Islam in Turkish society. Within that debate lies an equally fierce struggle among the Diyanet and administration of theology faculties, which are encumbered by a positivist, bureaucratic approach to teaching Islam; scores of brotherhoods (tarikats) and lodges (cemats), which compete to impose restrictive visions of how to interpret Islam in the Turkish context; and those commentators and theologians who would use critical thinking to refine both the understanding of Islam in the contemporary world and how to teach it.

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Diyamet: Public Demand for More Courses  
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15. (C) Mehmet Gormez, Diyanet vice president and an Ankara U. assistant professor of theology, conceded to us that the Diyanet mishandled the amendment launch. Saying that he and his colleagues are scholars, not politicians, and acknowledging that they had not taken into account political factors, Gormez nonetheless expressed puzzlement that the Diyanet's seemingly positive soundings with nodes of the Kemalist State (NSC, TGS, main opposition CHP) them boomeranged. He sought an explanation in bad timing -- the amendments were introduced just days after Islamic terrorists conducted bombings in Istanbul. He seemed puzzled when we asked why the Diyanet had not coordinated its plans with the Cabinet (Istanbul M.P. and Erdogan advisor Bagis told us Erdogan had had no idea the amendments were coming) or launched a public relations campaign to prepare the ground with the public through ministers' appearances on broadly-watched talk shows.

16. (C) In dismissing the idea that one should have an open public debate on such questions (e.g., through raising public awareness), Gormez revealed how much he and his colleagues suffer from the same elitist perspective as opponents of broader religious education. But he insists that opponents are distorting the content of the regulation. Following the February 28 process (the February 1997 memorandum from the military calling on the then-Erbakan government to halt Islamist policies and leading to the post-modern coup against Erbakan), the GOT closed many Koran courses, cutting the total number from 6,000 to about 3,000. Ever since, there has been a large, unmet demand, particularly among adults, Gormez said. Under the regulation, empty dormitories and other alternative facilities would only be used in situations where there was no appropriate space in the local mosque. Without such legislation, he maintained, the demand will continue to be met by illegal Koran courses outside State control.

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CHP: Regulation Would Expand "Poor Education"  
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17. (C) Oya Arasli, an MP from main opposition, "secularist" CHP, asserted to us the Koran courses provide poor education, and argued that any attempt to expand them represents a potential threat to the "secular" State. She said students in the courses learn only to memorize the Koran in Arabic. They don't learn the meaning of the Koran, and the courses don't help them become better Muslims. (Note: we have heard the same criticism from pious critically-thinking Turks and give it great weight. End note.) Arasli acknowledged that the regulation stated that the courses would include instruction on the meaning of the Koran and the moral lessons to be learned from the life of Mohammed. But she averred that in practice the regulation would just expand the existing practice of teaching rote memorization. Arasli criticized the article allowing imam hatip graduates to teach the courses. Teenagers fresh out of high school, she argued, are not qualified to teach children, nor to explain the meaning of the Koran. Although the regulation would allow imam hatip graduates to teach only temporarily, Arasli said in practice many such assignments would become permanent.

18. (C) Necdet Budak, also an MP from CHP, told us he does not believe the regulation is a major issue. Still, he wondered why the AK government is concerning itself with Koran courses while facing urgent challenges in areas like Cyprus, EU accession, and the economy. Repeating the CHP mantra -- which is unusual for Budak, a sharp critic of the CHP leadership -- he said one can never be sure of AK's ultimate intentions on religious matters.

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Some Support Principle, Criticize Details  
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19. (C) Tayyar Altikulac, AK MP and head of the parliamentary Education Committee, told us the regulation was well-intentioned, but suffered from several "technical mistakes." There is a demand for more Koran courses, especially night classes for working adults. But there is no reason to allow for the use of empty dormitories and boarding houses; such facilities are not needed, and the measure raised suspicions among AK's critics by falsely creating the impression that there would be a dramatic increase in the number of classes. In addition, classes held outside of mosques would be beyond the direct control of the Diyanet, making it possible for radical elements to exploit the courses for their own ends. Altikulac also said the Diyanet

should have consulted with him on the regulation, given his broad experience as a teacher and former Diyanet president.

10. (C) Mualla Selcuk, dean of the Ankara University Theology Faculty, raised similar concerns about the regulation. If the Diyanet had first consulted experts, she argued, it could have drafted a regulation better designed to improve the Koran courses, rather than simply increase their number. She said the regulation seemed to be motivated by politics more than religion -- an attempt to curry favor with the AK grassroots by increasing the number of classes.

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Regulation Will Return  
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11. (U) Gormez claimed the Diyanet will reintroduce the regulation later this year, after consulting with various parties and building support. The regulation will form one small element of a broad reform of Diyanet policies. The principle aim of the reform measures will be to raise the standards for imam training. Currently, anyone with an imam hatip high school degree can become an imam. The Diyanet plans to require all imams to have a four-year college degree by 2007 or 2008.

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AK MP: Improve Religion Education in Schools  
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12. (C) As far as Altikulac is concerned, the whole controversy over Koran courses would be nullified if the State would simply provide proper religious education in schools. He believes all schools should offer an optional religion course providing more extensive Islamic education than what is now available. If this were done, the demand for Koran courses would shrink dramatically. In addition, the imam hatip schools, which have become a magnet for pious families dissatisfied with religious education in traditional schools, would revert to their ostensible purpose -- educating future imams. "If the schools don't fulfill the demand for religious education, the debate will never end," he said.

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Comment  
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13. (C) This controversy is yet another example where (1) the Kemalist State has held in contempt the aspirations of a broad sector of the citizenry (one contact, involved in the February 28 process, recalled for us recently how a general summoned him and said, "Hey pal, why don't you just go and write a new Koran"); (2) many of those pushing for expanded religious education, influenced by a secretive and sectarian lodge mentality, have failed to clarify their intentions; and (3) both Kemalists and sectarians have drowned out more reasonable voices in the middle. This is not the first time the AK government has pulled back a proposal after opponents raised accusations of Islamist motives -- we last saw this when the GOT shelved a plan that would have enabled imam hatip graduates to enroll in university programs other than theology. Bad timing and a lack of consultation may have helped undermine the Koran course regulation. However, opposition to the measure is fueled both by a general distrust of AK's motives on religious matters and by concern that the new regulations contained loopholes which would weaken the ability to ensure both quality and a spirit of tolerance in the teaching.

14. (C) In Turkey distrust and concern are all too often expressions of fear and prejudice rather than reasoned argument. In this case, we take seriously the reservations expressed by MPs Arasli, Budak and Altikulac as well as by leading voices of more pious Turkey such as journalist Bedreddin Habiboglu. In the end, however, we should keep in mind that Turks tend to be relatively pious, and a large majority of the public bristles at the rigid State interpretation of "secularism." As long as the debate over the definition of secularism, the place of the State in religion, and limits of Islamic expression in a secular state remains unresolved, these types of conflicts will continue.  
EDELMAN